

**Capturing images of
Antarctica**

Iconic photographers from the Heroic age: Frank Hurley and Herbert Ponting



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ABSTRACT:

Capturing images of Antarctica is a challenge even under ideal conditions. Expedition photographers Herbert Ponting, *Terra Nova* (1910-13) and Frank Hurley, *Endurance* (1914-16) created iconic images from those two famous journeys. Their relentless drive to capture the moment, mood, scale, isolation and hardship are exhibited in their collection of exquisite photographs and some film footage. They were pioneers not only in the expeditions but also in their chosen profession.

The two photographers have different styles but both more than satisfied the public's appetite for images of distant places and spectacular events.

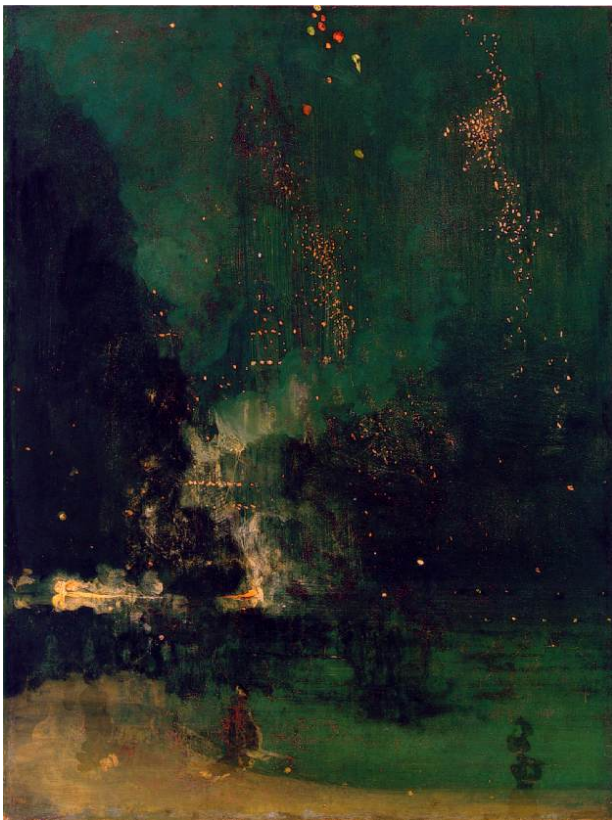
These photos are now Antarctic heritage artefacts that can be enjoyed, reproduced and traded by all Antarctic history enthusiasts.

This literature review compares these photographers' styles and personalities, and discusses their drive and professionalism for their art that is synonymous with the heroic age.

THE CAMERA AND PICTORIALISM

The invention of cameras in the early 19th century brought about a change in traditional painting and art. Photos took over from the traditional role of artists to record accurately, photos could now do this immediately and artists struggled to compete.

In the art world a dramatic change came from artist James McNeil Whistler (1834 – 1903 US born). Exhibiting in London in 1877 the public was treated to works which



showed only 'aesthetic' factors as shape, volume, colour and most important tone. People enjoyed works whose mistiness destroyed detail, the tonal range was strictly limited and careful compositions were in contrast to the replication style at the time.

Whistler's approach could be superbly imitated by the camera. Photographs could be produced in which no longer contained fine detail, but introduced harmony and proportion.

Pictorialism is a photographic term describing images that emphasises the artistic quality of the photograph rather than the scene it depicted with distinguishing characteristics as soft focus, special filters and lens coatings, heavy manipulation in the darkroom, and exotic printing processes.

Above: Nocturne in Black and Gold: The falling Rocket (1874) by James McNeill Whistler

It was in vogue from around 1885 through the early years of the 20th century, and declined rapidly after 1914 when photographers and critics in the 1920s began to embrace a more modernist approach to photographic practice. [Shutterbug, 2007 Wiki]

Kodak started mass producing their cheap portable camera and the days when professionals or the wealthy were the only ones to own a camera were gone. By 1890 Kodak was sweeping the world. The day of the snapshot had arrived.

Pictorialists created a distance between themselves as artists and the flood of snapshot-shooters who seemed to some to trivialise the camera.

CHIVALRY AND MORALITY

In the late Victorian and Edwardian period an atmosphere of high moral idealism prevailed. The German academic, George W. F. Hegel (University of Berlin 1818 to 1831) challenged the fashionable man-centred utilitarianism. Hegel preached a return to moral absolutes that stood over, and in judgement upon, human behaviour.

KH Digby wrote *The Broad Stone of Honour* published in 1822. This best seller claimed to be the rules of conduct for the Gentlemen of England. The ideals of knighthood was a code of chivalry which could unite aristocracy and the upper middle classes in a high minded code of behaviour for people to rule an Empire.

Public schools began to teach 'manly independence' and believed sport could train the character and help produce a 'valiant and noble manhood', protecting the weak and respecting womanhood.

A Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle appalled by the social and industrial horrors of the 19th century believed that the only hope of the future lay in the raising of a generation of heroes - individuals who were tough and dedicated and would battle with injustice, poverty and exploitation.

Headmasters through to Judges delivered these stoic moral imperatives to several generations of schoolchildren. It was the basis of what we know as Victorianism.

This was the world that Frank Hurley and Herbert Ponting were born into and it influenced their lives and work.

The chivalric morality that life was serious, that duty was an honour and that every good deed was in response to a moral imperative was enjoyed by Hurley with enthusiasm. [Millar, 1984, p 12]

HURLEY HISTORY

James Francis (Frank) Hurley was born 15 October 1885 at Glebe, a working class suburb in west Sydney. His father was a dedicated union man originally from Lancashire. [Millar, 1984p 14]

At 13 he had an altercation with a teacher and stole his way to Darling Harbour on a train. By next morning he was over the Blue Mountains and in Lithgow finding a job in the Esk Bank Ironworks. His father praised his son's determination and courage and added, 'If you can't find a way – then make one'. [Bickel, 1980, p12]

At the works he struck up a friendship with Big Bill who was also a camera enthusiast. They tramped the foothills in the weekends. Hurley brought a Kodak box brownie and was hooked. He was gifted with a highly retentive mind and learned the principles of light values, steadiness of hand, time exposures, picture composition, process of production, tricks of developing, fixing and shading in darker areas for effect.

Within 12 months he was a professional winning his first assignment and brought his first plate camera. In 1905 at 20 years he brought into a thriving post card business. Skies were always of high importance to Hurley's developing artistic sense and often he would manipulate clouds to make them right.

In 1910, at the age of 25, he saw a chance to link photography with adventure, Australian explorer Dr Douglas Mawson was planning an expedition to Antarctica 1911-14 aboard the *Aurora*. Hurley brashly cornered Mawson in a private railway compartment and asked for the job as expedition photographer. [Kodak, 2007, Hurley]

Mawson commented years later, "The most essential quality in a man exploring the Antarctic is the ability to adjust, to meet the challenges, to show initiative". [Bickel, 1980, p 16]

Supporting the Mawson expedition, Hurley set out on 10 November 1912 for the magnetic South Pole, selected for his sledge handling skills and strength as opposed to his photographic skills. With Eric Webb and Bob Bage they hauled a half ton (508 kg) sledge wading at times in snow up to their waists. [Bickel, 1980, p 30]

After six weeks of sledging they were 80 km from the magnetic South Pole. They could not continue as their food would run out on 15 January. After four hours of intricate instrument work with frozen fingers, and observations at - 42°C they turned for home. 'With feelings half glad and regretful we turned back.....' [Millar, 1984, p 25]

They arrived back at the hut with snow blindness, starvation and physical exhaustion. Hurley swore he'd never venture out onto the polar ice cap again.

Returning to Australia Hurley quickly put together his first 'moving film' *Home of the Blizzard*. Audiences were thrilled in Australia and England and it raised funds for the *Aurora* to return to Commonwealth Bay rescuing Mawson and his five colleagues.

IMPERIAL TRANS ANTARCTIC 'ENDURANCE' EXPEDITION

Hurley was on a field trip in the Australian outback and received this cable, 'You are appointed official photographer imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition stop If acceptable be aboard *Endurance* Buenos Aires by October 10 [1914] – Shackleton'.

Despite vowing never to return to the ice cap, the temptation was too great. With better equipment and on his 29th birthday he was aboard the *Endurance* heading south.

Shackleton's plan was to complete a trans Antarctic expedition from the Weddell Sea through the geographical south pole to McMurdo. Crew from the *Aurora* would lay depots from McMurdo for this phase of the expedition.

In South Georgia Hurley boarded a 'modern factory ship', the *Sir James Clark Ross* (22,000 tons). At least 2000 whales were killed to fill the ships tanks, a 'monster abattoir, with blood cascading from its scuppers into a red sea covered with oil and

grease turns interest into revulsion'. Hurley boarded a chaser for 40 hours witnessing the capture of a 'blue leviathan' 85 feet long. 'I had marvelled at the devices that enabled man's ingenuity to triumph over nature's moods and most powerful creatures, but I marvelled still more that man was unable to triumph over the seemingly more potent monster of his creating: its name is greed.' [Hurley, 1948, p. 198]

In the Weddell Sea the *Endurance* became embedded in the ice and they were carried, locked in for months. Hurley did not relish the prospect of spending winter in an ice bound ship due to cramping work and forced association with the ship's party. [p. 42]

On the evening 27 August 1915 he took some of the greatest photos of photographic history with temperatures of 70°F below freezing point. Using twenty flashes, half blinded by the flashes and losing his bearings, bumping shins and stumbling into deep snow drifts, he toiled away in the embalming cold. [Millar, 1984, p. 38]

The *Endurance* was crushed by the ice and sunk. Then began a five month drift on the precarious sea ice. They were in good spirits, healthy and had ample food supplemented by Hurley, the hunter-gatherer, his skiing expertise permitting forage for penguins and seals.

Hurley described Sir Ernest as a great teammate and claimed a close friendship had sprung up between them. When things were the blackest Shackleton would rise to his best.

Leaving the ice, the party rowed their three life boats to Elephant Island, where Shackleton decided to make a desperate bid to rescue his team. He took five seamen on a 750 mile journey across the Southern Ocean to South Georgia, aiming to take 14 days and return to Elephant Island within a month to uplift the 22 men.

On the 30th of August, 137th day of their marooning Hurley and Marsten were scanning the horizon and spotted the rescue vessel *Yelcho*. Hurley considered it a 'worthy occasion' to use one of the last three remaining spaces of film.

Hurley did not attempt to describe their feelings at the reunion. [Hurley, 1947, p288]

At Buenos Aires, Hurley, a teetotaler, tired quickly of the celebrations and spent long days in the darkroom confirming all the plates exposed on the *Endurance* were excellent. The small Kodak film suffered but was printable.

Hurley returned to London and worked on developing the photos, his motion picture, lantern slides to be used in lectures and the preparations of albums.

In November, he returned to South Georgia to get wildlife photos and footage, reproducing those he abandoned on the ice. Two years later in 1919, the film *In the grip of the Polar Ice* was released.

The most controversial image of this expedition is the scene on Elephant Island with the crew standing on the beach, hands aloft, cheering, as the lifeboat from the *Yelcho* heaves into view. Hurley called it 'The Rescue'.

Worsley uses the same image in his book *The Endurance* but entitled it: 'The departure of the *James Caird* from Elephant Island'.

The original film negative shows that the *James Caird* has been roughly scratched out leaving the *Stancomb Wills* and the 'marooned' crew. The only explanation for this is that Hurley needed a climatic photo to end his lecture.

Success and failure was in the balance with the departure of the *James Caird*. The bravery of those left behind, their hands raised boldly in a courageous farewell had been captured, but then destroyed by Hurley's manipulation.

[Alexander, 1999, p. 202]



Above: Hurley's 'The Rescue' and Worsley's 'The departure of the *James Caird* from Elephant Island'.

PONTING HISTORY

Herbert George Ponting was born in Salisbury, England 21 March 1870. He followed his father into a banking career. After four years, he went to San Francisco and with generous parental support, brought a fruit farm and invested in gold mining.

Ponting became interested in photography in 1900. Immediately successful, he won a world prize with a telephoto shot of San Francisco Bay. He sold stereo negatives for publication as postcards and was invited to New York by syndicated periodicals. He travelled the world widely before being engaged by Scott in 1910. [Boddington, 1979, p. 16]

TERRA NOVA BRITISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1910-13

On the *Terra Nova* Ponting took a vast array of cameras, films and accessories so he could meet every scientific and general situation he was likely to encounter.

Members of the expedition had initial doubts about Ponting as he was seen as fussy, prim and demanding. He soon won the respect of his shipmates engaging in contortionist efforts to get the best possible footage. He climbed the rigging in high

winds and worked tirelessly recording members, events and general images. [Riffenburgh, 2004 p. 30]

Arriving at McMurdo, Scott released Ponting from the duties of unloading. Ponting hauled a heavily laden sledge, taking pictures 22 hours a day. He had an early encounter with eight killer whales. They crashed into the ice floes nearly pitching him into the sea, he leapt from one floe to the next to escape with advice coming from the crew. [Boddington, 1979, p.20]



Painting by Ernst Linzeli



Relaying the story years later

He built his own dark room in the hut which Scott justified by the quality of work produced by such an 'artist'. [Riffenburgh, 2004 p. 213]

Ponting gave entertaining evening talks with exquisite lantern slides taken from all over the world. Scott considered him a great asset for this and it was increasingly apparent that no previous expedition had been illustrated so extensively. [p. 38]

The cold was such that once, when Ponting was focusing his camera, he moistened his lips with his tongue. It came into contact with a metal part on the camera. He had to jerk it away to get it unstuck, the tip of his tongue remaining with the metal part. [p. 39]



Above: Before and after photos of Bowers, Wilson and Cherry Garrard immortalised 'The worst journey in the world'. 'Their faces bore unmistakable evidence of the terrible hardships they had endured', Ponting recorded, 'their looks haunted me for days'. [Riffenburgh, 2004, p. 39]

Below: Ponting was conscious of the marketing potential of the expeditions and set up many photos incorporating the sponsors products.



*Liebig Co. Oxo drinks
[p.76]*



*Heinz baked
Beans [p.229]*



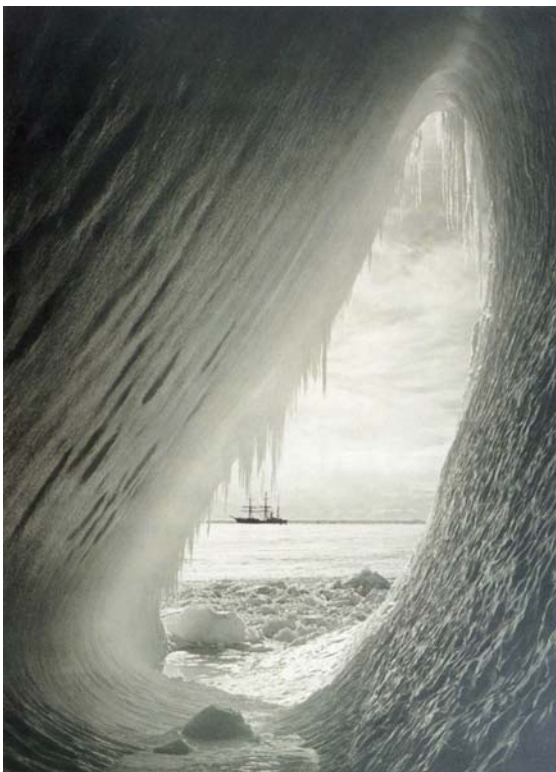
*McCarthy at the
wheel. 'Wolsey
underwear'
[p.227]*



*Messrs J S Fry & Sons
coca, sledging and
fancy chocolate [p.198]*

[Riffenburgh, 2004]

Ponting's landscape photography is his supreme achievement. He did not look *at* a scene so much as *into* it. He assessed different colours and studied the tonal ranges. Decades later American Ansel Adams would develop this as the 'zone system'.



Terra Nova Cape Evans inside grotto –Ponting



The Endurance at night - Hurley

SELECTION

The success of Hurley's film *'Home of the blizzard'* about the Mawson expedition had partly inspired Shackleton's venture and he hired Hurley on this basis. Shackleton hoped to partly finance a cross-Antarctica expedition through advance sales of photographic, film, and story rights. [Kodak, 2007]

If Shackleton had interviewed Hurley in person a personality trait or conflict may have been detected.

Scott met Ponting through Cecil Meares who had been employed as transport officer. [Arnold, 1969, p. 47] Scott interviewed Ponting and selected him from 100 applicants. (He was) [Ponting] doing beautiful work. He was considered to be the greatest outdoor cameraman in the world. [p. 49]

CHARACTER

Shackleton insisted that Hurley leave his glass negatives on the abandoned ship. Ignoring the order Hurley stripped to the waist and dived into the mushy ice retrieving the precious items. [Shackleton, 1999, p. 78]

Mawson praised Hurley for his enthusiasm, taking pictures with painful frostbite, and cheerfully carrying out his duties in the face of great difficulties. He was always willing to undergo great hardships to accomplish an end and danger added but a zest. The technical considerations speak for themselves. [Bickel, 1980, p 25]

Aboard the *Endurance* Hurley was considered 'hard as nails', able to endure harsh conditions and willing to go to any length to obtain a shot. Professionally much admired, he was not universally liked. He was keenly aware of his superior abilities, his nickname was 'The Prince'.

'Hurley, our photographer is an interesting character. He is Australian – very Australian. As a photographer he excels and I doubt if his work could be equalled by Ponting (Orde-Lees diary).

The two men, one very British and the other very Australian, could hardly have been more different.

Ponting was prudent, pedantic and subject to depression. He remained a loner, seriously working his lectures, slide shows and film screenings.

Hurley was an enigma. He is described as gregarious and enjoyed performing within groups and ironically was also seen as a loner. He was bombastic, vain, arrogant, high-handed and not easy to get on with - but above all else, he was eminently capable. [Alexander, 1999, p. 189]

Both were obsessed with photography beyond anything else, and neither surpassed their Antarctic work. [Boddington, 1979 p. 17]

PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLE

Hurley's images from when *Endurance* entered the pack ice are marvellous, bold abstract patterns shaped by the play of the ship's mast against the ice. They reflect Antarctica as a bare white canvas etched by the stark, clean lines of the *Endurance* and her shadow. [Alexander, 1999, p. 65]

I was particularly moved by the stark monotone pictures taken by Hurley. [Montheith, 2001, p. 124]

Sir Ranulph Fiennes having worked as a photographer in Antarctic claims Ponting as one of the truly great photographers of the 20th century. [Riffenburgh, 2004 p. 30]

In Hurley's photographs, nature dominates, even in the close ups, such as a picture of a meteorologist with a frozen mask, nature in the form of ice or snow intrudes forcibly on the picture, obliterating the individuality of the person photographed. [Millar, 1984, p. 28]
See right

Ponting belonged to a school of photography which was not regarded as artistic by the artistic conventions of the time. He did not indulge in tricks or composites and sought straight crisp effects with maximum depth of field and technically rigorous development

Ponting preferred to be known as a camera artist with great technical competence and brought together the most perfect photographic equipment ever devised. [Arnold, 1969, p.51]



RELATIONSHIPS

Why Shackleton never liked Hurley, and deeply mistrusted him is not clear. Shackleton counselled Hurley on the ice, catering for his vanity. Hurley however, expressed his admiration of Shackleton, both openly and privately.

Inexplicably Shackleton barely mentions Hurley in his book *South* despite the photos and footage that publicly made the expedition and helped meet the financial debts. Hurley was well regarded by the Mawson expedition and perhaps Shackleton was intimidated by him? If other capable Australians had been present, may have put him in his place?

FINANCING THE EXPEDITIONS

Shackleton was broke after the war and financial necessity compelled him to go on the lecture circuit. Hurley's luminous lantern slides evoked haunting memories. Hurley had invented an ingenious method of composite image making, whereby photos of wildlife were superimposed upon stretches of empty ice or any number of scenes were set against spectacularly back lit clouds – his trademark. The purpose of this was purely commercial and he had no compunction about this manipulation. [Alexander, 1999, p. 191]

Scott, Shackleton and Mawson demonstrated vision and business acumen to include professional photographers and their expeditions. One does not see a bad Ponting picture. If they did not reach his high standard he smashed his plates.

Scott planned to use Ponting's photographs and moving films to publicise the expedition and refund the investors. Ponting found on his return that the rights to his photos had been sold without his knowledge. [p. 39]

CONSERVATION

On Macquarie Island with Mawson, Hurley had witnessed butchering of the penguins to obtain oil. He estimated 150,000 birds annually were killed. At the end of WW1 he campaigned successfully to close Joseph Hatch's rendering plant down. Mawson and Hurley also condemned the killing of whales due to the short-sightedness of the economics and also because of their admiration of these harmless mammals.

Hurley had experienced extermination of sea-elephants at American Bay at Crozet Islands by a South African company. Not only were the mature animals slaughtered, but cubs were clubbed to death with cruelty bordering on sadism.

Hurley argued that the unrestricted massacre of any form of sea life should be rigorously controlled by international agreements and poachers should be subject to the severe penalty of confiscation of plant and ships. [Hurley, 1948, p 186]

POST EXPEDITION

Hurley met Ponting only once, at the conclusion of the Shackleton expedition, during the war. He heard Ponting's film lecture *With Captain Scott in the Antarctic* four times. Hurley recorded the pictures were the 'acme' of photographic perfection. Ponting told a friend in 1930 that Hurley is a 'crackerjack' with the camera. [Arnold, 1969, p. 49]

Ponting lived for over 20 years after his Antarctic experience, but his photography virtually ended. It seems apparent that he dedicated his life to the memory of Captain Scott. [Siebel, 2003, p. 175]. Ponting promoted his photos and made a sound version of the film *90° South* released in 1933. His book, *Great White South* was published in 1921 and ran into 11 editions in his life time. With poor business acumen he died almost destitute on 7 February 1935 aged 65.

Hurley continued with his movies post *Endurance* and went to World War 1 and 2 as a war photographer and captured the mood and devastation of war in some controversial composite photos slammed by official historians as not an accurate record of the war. He lived an active and successful life and died 16 January 1962 aged 77 [Boddington, 1979, p. 22]

CONCLUSION

Unlike Ponting who would never manipulate a photograph in the dark room, Hurley an idealist, believed that nature should never be seen as she was – but as she should be. In this respect he was different from Ponting, who staked his reputation and his prints on a straight approach and a dislike of manipulation for effect, although he considered himself as a camera artist, a level above a photographer.

Against this distant and idealised vision Hurley had to find a place for the individual. Nature represented an ideal which prompted the individual to strive for recognition by the feats of heroism, tenacity or strength. Then and only then would nature take note of the presence of mortal humanity.

World War 1 had changed everything and most of all, the heroic ideal. To have survived the *Endurance* expedition rather than died in the trenches was perceived as cowardice. Britain wanted dead heroes. [Siebel, 2003, p.177]



Above. In contrast to 'The Rescue' (page 6) the sunlight bursts through the clouds (thanks to Hurley) in benediction as Shackleton and his crew of five launch the tiny *James Caird* for the epic and unbelievable journey in the hands of nature. [Millar, 1984, p. 141]. Compare original below.



To compare Ponting and Hurley it needs to be emphasised that Ponting had significant advantages, he was more experienced and was permitted to do his photography at the exclusion of everything else

Hurley was a full member of the *Endurance* expedition with daily responsibilities and snatched photos when he could. Ponting had time to strive for the perfect result. The *Endurance* expedition was far more stressful for Hurley than the *Terra Nova* journey was for Ponting.

Ponting and Hurley were also movie pioneers with their cinematography and these contributed to easing the financial strain. [p.220]

Hurley's conservationist ideals were ahead of their time. His passionate concern and proposed solutions are concurrent with modern thinking today almost 100 years on.

Ponting admitted he found Antarctica very disappointing for photography. The weather, the weight of the camera equipment dragged on a 400lb sledge was severely limiting.

The record Hurley made of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition was an extreme achievement in the face of extreme conditions, a brilliant failure.

Ponting's record is of a tragic loss of life that occurred off camera.

Both Hurley and Ponting far exceeded any previous Antarctic photographic work and the standard that they set remains unsurpassed today. Hurley is the expeditionist, Ponting is the patient master.

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